

A Story of Violence

Re-narrating the Killer's Testimony on the Rwandan Genocide

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In France, contemporary literature has taken an 'historical' turn, focussing again on the important events that have shaped the way we think about the world today, and on the personal experience of people who witnessed them. My interest goes out to reports on mass violence and conflict, considered from the perpetrator's perspective. It will be demonstrated that issues of biography and history are not simply 'represented' but reinscribed and translated by the text. I propose to investigate this relation between history and narrative – witnessing and writing – through the genre of testimonial literature. To illustrate my approach I present an analysis of two books on the Rwandan genocide: the first is *Une Saison de machettes* (2003) [*Machete Season*], a documentary account written by war reporter Jean Hatzfeld and based on interviews he took from condemned *génocidaires*. I set it against *Le Passé devant soi* (2008) by Gilbert Gatore, a young Rwandan author who addresses the question of the genocide through fiction, intertwining the stories of the perpetrator and the victim.

Given that Michael Riffaterre's frequently quoted definition of literary testimony only concerns the victim's testimony and even excludes the killer's, we need to examine the particular nature of the perpetrator's text: why does he choose to testify, what does he want to achieve, to whom does he speak, and what are the precise conditions and circumstances of his speech? Can a perpetrator even be considered a witness in the strict sense of the word? Argumentation theory as it is formulated by Ruth Amossy (2006) recognises the social, political and cultural dimension of discourse and provides a theoretical instrument to tackle some of the most insistent questions. I also refer to Joanna Bourke (1999), who proposes a version of narrative theory that can account for the very possibility of the perpetrator's story. The author establishes that killers construct 'rationalising' stories which allow them – and society – to deflect questions of guilt and responsibility.

The polyphony of the Rwandan corpus constitutes an important cue for drafting a suitable theoretical framework. The perspective of the perpetrator offers a highly interesting angle, because it allows to assess the mediating activity of the author who 'quotes' or 'voices' the killer. Indeed the question arises of whether it is morally acceptable to give the perpetrator a platform. Mona Baker's (2006) reworking of the 'framing' concept proves to be particularly useful to uncover the discursive strategies exploited by the author to intervene in the re-narrated story and to manipulate the reader's interpretation. The framing activity in the Rwandan case illustrates the 'argumentative aim' of the text and can presumably be considered as the production of a counter-discourse. A contrastive study of a fictional and a non-fictional text reveals furthermore how the same discourse – that of the Rwandan *génocidaire* – can be framed in different ways. I will argue that the frame substantially influences the meaning and functioning of this discourse in the literary text, with the intention of emphasising the constitutive importance of the literary form.

Research Models in Translation Studies II

29/4/11 – 2/5/11

Manchester University / University College London

Conference Organisers: Mona Baker (UM), Theo Hermans (UCL), Maeve Olohan (UM), Luis Pérez-González (UM)